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The Visitor Who Stayed: Lisa Choegyal and the Reinvention of Nepal Tourism

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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Lisa Choegyal arrived in Nepal in 1974 as a young traveller and stayed long enough to become part of the country's tourism history. She entered the industry when trekking was still experimental, jungle lodges were helping define wildlife tourism and many of the institutions that now organise Himalayan travel did not yet exist. Over the following five decades, she worked across adventure tourism, conservation, destination planning, writing, heritage, film production and diplomacy. Her career became intertwined with one of Nepal's enduring questions: how

can visitors generate livelihoods without wearing away the landscapes and cultures they came to experience?

Choegyal's perspective is unusual because it was formed through both private-sector tourism and conservation work. She spent more than two decades with Tiger Tops and the wider Tiger Mountain group, later became an owner of Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge, worked as a tourism consultant across more than thirty countries and wrote extensively about Nepal's landscapes and the people who built its tourism industry. Since 2010, she has also served as New Zealand's Honorary Consul in Nepal.

Her story is inevitably complicated by the fact that she is an outsider who made Nepal her home. Long residence does not erase the distinction between visitor and native, and affection does not automatically grant authority over someone else's country. Yet fifty years of work can create another kind of relationship: responsibility. Choegyal's career is most useful when understood through that tension rather than through a simple "foreigner who fell in love with Nepal" narrative.

Arriving in 1974

Choegyal first came to Nepal in 1974 while travelling through Asia. Kathmandu was still famous as part of the overland trail, but Nepal's adventure-tourism industry remained young. Roads reached far fewer places, trekking logistics depended heavily on

local support and Chitwan's wildlife-tourism model was still developing.

She later wrote that she had not intended to stay. What changed the plan was not only the mountains but the sense that a new industry was being invented around her. Tourism in Nepal was still small enough that individuals could help shape its conventions.

That early timing became central to her later historical perspective. She did not study the beginnings of Nepali tourism from archives first; she worked inside them.

From Trekker to Tiger Tops

Choegyal's first major professional home became Tiger Tops, the pioneering wildlife-tourism company associated with Chitwan National Park. After persuading founder Jim Edwards to give her a job, she worked in Chitwan and later in Kathmandu, eventually becoming marketing director for Tiger Tops and Mountain Travel.

The company sat at an important intersection between tourism and conservation. Wildlife was the attraction, which meant the business had a direct economic interest in maintaining healthy habitats. This relationship helped establish an early model of conservation-minded tourism in Nepal.

Choegyal's work exposed her to the logistical reality behind what visitors experienced as adventure. Lodges, guides, elephant handlers, naturalists, cooks, pilots and trekking teams all formed part of a system that had to function reliably far from urban infrastructure.

Chitwan Before Mass Tourism

Chitwan in the 1970s was a very different tourism landscape from the one visitors know today. Wildlife viewing was still developing as a commercial product, and the boundaries between conservation, tourism and local livelihoods were being negotiated in real time.

Choegyal's own stories from this period include encounters with rhinos and elephant-back jungle travel that belong to an earlier era of wildlife tourism. Some of those practices would later be reconsidered as animal-welfare standards evolved.

This historical distance is important. Responsible tourism is not a fixed set of practices; it changes as knowledge, ethics and expectations change.

Tourism and Conservation

Choegyal's career increasingly focused on the idea that tourism could support conservation rather than simply consume landscapes. Protected areas need political and financial support,

and well-managed tourism can create both if local communities receive meaningful benefits.

The model is attractive but not automatic. Visitors consume water, energy and land. Lodges create jobs but can also inflate prices and change social relationships. Wildlife viewing may finance protection while disturbing the animals being protected.

Responsible tourism therefore requires continuous negotiation rather than one certification or slogan.

Mountain Travel and the Trekking Industry

Tiger Mountain and Mountain Travel were part of the early development of commercial trekking in Nepal. Before online booking, GPS navigation and the dense lodge networks of today, trekking required far more logistical organisation through specialist operators.

Choegyal worked in marketing at a time when selling a trekking holiday often meant selling Nepal itself. Potential visitors knew Everest, but they did not necessarily understand what a multi-day Himalayan journey involved.

The early operators therefore became informal ambassadors, helping create the global image of Nepal as one of the world's great adventure destinations.

The Marketing of Nepal

Tourism marketing always simplifies. A country is compressed into images capable of catching attention: Everest, temples, prayer flags, tigers, smiling villagers. These images can attract visitors while also reducing a complicated society to a handful of symbols.

Choegyal spent much of her career working inside this contradiction. The industry needed strong imagery to sell journeys, yet successful tourism ultimately depended on visitors understanding that the destination was more than scenery.

Her later writing often returned to the characters, institutions and histories that disappeared behind tourism branding.

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge

Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge opened in 1998 and became part of a generation of high-value tourism businesses trying to combine comfort with a lower environmental footprint. Choegyal remains closely associated with the lodge as an owner and director.

The lodge's model emphasises landscape, local employment, community relationships and relatively low-density tourism rather than high-volume construction. It represents a different philosophy from measuring success primarily through room numbers.

This matters because tourism revenue depends not only on how many visitors arrive but how much value remains in the destination after they leave.

High Value Versus High Volume

Nepal has often celebrated tourism through arrival figures. A record number of visitors is treated automatically as success. Choegyal's work has consistently pointed toward a more complicated measurement.

Ten low-spending visitors can create more environmental pressure than one high-spending visitor while producing similar local income. The distribution of spending also matters: a package controlled largely from abroad may leave much less money in Nepal than a smaller community-owned operation.

Responsible tourism therefore asks about yield, local ownership and environmental cost—not just headcount.

Consulting Across Asia-Pacific

From the 1990s onward, Choegyal expanded into international tourism consulting. Her work took her to more than thirty countries, often focusing on protected areas, heritage sites, rural destinations and adventure tourism.

These assignments gave her a comparative perspective on Nepal. Problems that appear uniquely Nepali—overdevelopment, waste, weak destination management, uneven community benefits—also occur elsewhere.

The value of international experience lies in learning which solutions can transfer and which depend too heavily on local conditions.

The Great Himalayan Trail

Choegyal contributed to the development concept around the Great Himalayan Trail, which sought to connect long-distance routes across Nepal and direct visitors toward less-travelled regions. The idea was partly economic and partly environmental.

Tourism is heavily concentrated around a small number of famous corridors. Spreading visitors can create income elsewhere and reduce pressure in saturated destinations.

But distribution also risks exporting the problems of popular trekking areas to places that are less prepared. New routes require planning before growth becomes difficult to reverse.

Tourism as Rural Development

Well-designed tourism can create unusually distributed rural employment. Guides, lodge owners, farmers, transport operators,

craftspeople and food suppliers can all benefit from visitors without moving permanently to cities.

This is one reason adventure tourism became economically important in mountain regions with limited alternatives. Yet the benefits can become concentrated if outside companies own accommodation and transport.

Choegyal's sustainable-tourism work has often focused on keeping more economic value inside the communities visitors actually travel through.

The Climate Crisis

In recent years, Choegyal has increasingly described herself as worrying about the Himalayan climate crisis. That concern is unavoidable for anyone whose career has depended on mountain landscapes.

Glacier retreat, unpredictable rainfall, landslides and changing snow conditions affect tourism infrastructure and local livelihoods simultaneously. Climate change is not only a conservation issue; it changes routes, water availability and the long-term viability of destinations.

Tourism is both vulnerable to climate change and a contributor to emissions through international aviation and high-consumption travel.

The Carbon Contradiction

Nepal wants more international tourists because tourism generates foreign exchange and employment. Most visitors, however, arrive by air, and long-haul aviation has a substantial carbon footprint.

This creates an uncomfortable contradiction for sustainable-tourism advocates. The industry can reduce waste, energy use and local environmental damage while remaining tied to global transportation emissions it cannot control fully.

The honest response is not claiming tourism can become impact-free. It is reducing avoidable harm and increasing the social value created from each journey.

Writing the Industry's Memory

Choegyal became increasingly active as a writer and editor, documenting tourism, wildlife, architecture and the people who shaped modern Nepal. Her *So Far So Good* columns in Nepali Times revisited the early years of tourism through personal memory.

This work matters because industries often fail to record their own beginnings. A company disappears, a guide dies or a lodge changes ownership, and the stories vanish with them.

Writing turns personal memory into a public archive.

Books and Historical Images

Her publications include *Everest: Reflections on the Solukhumbu, Nepal Himalaya: A Journey Through Time* and *Kathmandu Valley Style*, alongside editorial work involving Elizabeth Hawley's chronicles and historical photography.

The books reveal a consistent concern with change over time. Mountains appear permanent from a human perspective, while settlements, architecture and tourism practices transform rapidly.

Historical photographs make this transformation visible in ways statistics cannot.

Architecture and the Kathmandu Valley

Kathmandu Valley Style reflected Choegyal's interest in built heritage at a time when traditional architecture was being replaced rapidly by concrete construction. Tourism benefits from heritage, but tourism can also contribute to commercial pressure around historic districts.

Preservation is difficult because traditional buildings are expensive to maintain and often less convenient than modern structures. Residents cannot be expected to protect heritage solely for visitors.

Sustainable conservation therefore requires incentives that make preservation valuable to the people who own and inhabit historic places.

Film Production and Global Images

Choegyal also worked in production liaison for international films and documentaries shot in Nepal, including *Little Buddha*, *IMAX Everest*, *Everest* and Marvel's *Doctor Strange*. Film production can create significant local spending and global exposure.

It also shapes how millions of people imagine Nepal. Kathmandu may become a mystical city, Everest a place of heroic danger and the Himalaya a visual shorthand for spirituality.

Tourism professionals then operate inside expectations partly created by cinema.

The Benefits and Risks of Screen Tourism

A popular film can increase interest in a destination quickly.

Visitors may arrive specifically looking for a location they saw on screen, creating new economic opportunity.

But sudden attention can also overwhelm places never designed for large crowds. Film-driven tourism works best when destination managers prepare for success rather than celebrate publicity alone.

Choegyal's film work gave her unusual insight into this connection between cultural representation and visitor behaviour.

New Zealand Honorary Consul

Since 2010, Choegyal has served as New Zealand's Honorary Consul in Nepal. The role is another expression of her life between countries, involving support for New Zealanders and representation in a country where she has lived for decades.

Honorary consular work is practical rather than grand diplomatic theatre. Travellers encounter accidents, legal problems, disasters and emergencies that require someone who understands local systems.

Choegyal's long residence and network made her particularly suited to that function.

A Foreigner Who Stayed

There is an obvious danger in romanticising foreigners who spend long lives in Nepal. Colonial habits can reappear when outsiders are praised for "discovering" places or solving problems local people were already addressing.

Choegyal's story is more useful when those power differences remain visible. She had international mobility, access and networks that many Nepalis did not.

The question is how those advantages were used and whether they strengthened local institutions rather than replacing them.

Belonging Without Ownership

Long residence creates intimacy but not ownership. Choegyal can know Nepal deeply while still understanding that she does not represent the country in the way a citizen might.

This position between visitor and native can be productive because it encourages comparison and attention. It can also become uncomfortable when outsiders are given more authority than local experts.

Responsible belonging requires recognising both connection and limit.

Tourism After Fifty Years

The Nepal tourism industry of the 2020s is vastly larger, faster and more connected than the one Choegyal entered in 1974.

Travellers book online, share routes instantly and expect infrastructure in places that once required expedition-style logistics.

The core challenge, however, remains familiar. Tourism depends on the quality of the destination, yet growth can degrade that quality if unmanaged.

This is why sustainability has moved from a niche philosophy to a central economic issue.

The Visitor Economy Nepal Wants

Nepal now faces a strategic choice about what kind of tourism growth it wants. Volume can create jobs quickly, while high-value, lower-impact tourism may produce more revenue with less pressure on fragile destinations.

The answer does not have to be one model nationally. Kathmandu, Chitwan, Everest, remote trekking districts and pilgrimage sites have different capacities.

Destination management is precisely about accepting that tourism policy should be local enough to fit the place.

Memory as Responsibility

Choegyal's longevity also gives her a role as witness. She remembers the people who established tourism businesses, conservation projects and trekking routes before those institutions became taken for granted.

Witness carries responsibility because memory can become selective. The early years may appear more adventurous and authentic in retrospect than they felt to people excluded from opportunity or affected by tourism's growth.

Good historical writing therefore preserves achievement without turning the past into a golden age.

The Reinvention of Nepal Tourism

Lisa Choegyal came to Nepal at a moment when the country was inventing modern tourism. She then lived through trekking booms, political conflict, conservation breakthroughs, mass aviation, the internet, earthquakes, pandemics and the climate crisis.

Few people have watched the industry across that entire span from inside it. Her career therefore offers both a personal story and a long view of how tourism changes a country.

The Ethics of Wildlife Tourism

Choegyal's career also spans a major change in how wildlife tourism is judged. Practices once treated as normal parts of the visitor experience—including elephant-backed safaris—have been reconsidered as animal-welfare standards have evolved. A responsible tourism professional has to accept that yesterday's innovation can become tomorrow's ethical problem.

This is one reason sustainability cannot be a permanent checklist. New scientific evidence and changing public values force businesses to update practices even when those practices were once central to the brand.

Tourism becomes more credible when it is willing to retire experiences that no longer meet contemporary standards rather than defending them through nostalgia.

Tourism and Local Agency

Another recurring challenge is who gets to decide what kind of tourism a community receives. National planners and outside investors may see economic opportunity where residents see pressure on water, land or cultural life.

Community participation matters because “benefit” is not distributed automatically. A destination can become globally famous while the people living there receive low wages and rising living costs.

Choegyal’s consultancy work has repeatedly operated around this tension: visitors need places to experience, but those places do not exist for visitors alone.

The Value of Historical Memory

Her long residence gives Choegyal access to a form of institutional memory Nepal’s tourism sector often lacks. She remembers when many routes, lodges and conservation initiatives were still experiments rather than established brands.

This memory can help younger operators distinguish between problems that are genuinely new and problems the industry has been repeating for decades. Waste, destination concentration and weak planning may look modern, but earlier generations encountered versions of the same issues.

Remembering past mistakes is one of the least expensive forms of innovation.

The Tourism Industry After the Climate Shock

Climate change will increasingly force Nepal to rethink seasonality, infrastructure and safety. Trekking windows may shift, extreme rainfall can damage roads and trails, and glacier-related hazards can affect communities well beyond tourism areas.

Operators who treat climate as a distant environmental issue will be poorly prepared. The businesses most likely to survive are those that build resilience into route planning, water systems, insurance and destination design.

Choegyal's environmental emphasis therefore looks less like a niche philosophy and more like practical tourism management.

What Staying Means

Remaining in Nepal for more than half a century does not erase Choegyal's origin as a visitor. Instead, it changes the ethical standard applied to her presence. Long-term belonging creates obligations to listen, document carefully and avoid turning affection into ownership.

Her career is most interesting precisely because it never fits one category cleanly: foreigner, resident, investor, writer, consultant and honorary consul all describe pieces of the same life.

That ambiguity may be a better description of modern transnational belonging than any single label.

The Question of What Tourism Should Preserve

Conservation in tourism is sometimes reduced to protecting scenery, but destinations are social systems as well as landscapes. A trekking village can retain beautiful mountains while losing local ownership, affordable housing or traditional livelihoods.

Preserving a destination therefore requires attention to who continues to live there and who benefits from its popularity.

Choegyal's long career provides a useful historical lens because she has watched tourism create both opportunity and pressure across several generations. The industry that once needed more

visitors now also needs stronger management of where those visitors go, what they consume and how much value remains locally.

The mature version of responsible tourism is not anti-growth. It asks that growth be judged by what remains healthy after the visitor leaves: ecosystems, communities, heritage and the economic ability of residents to continue calling the destination home.

That question becomes more urgent as tourism grows faster than some destinations can manage. The strongest legacy of Choegyal's generation may be the recognition that tourism quality cannot be separated from destination stewardship, local ownership and the willingness to set limits before damage becomes irreversible.

She arrived as a visitor and stayed long enough to become part of the systems that receive later visitors. The most important question running through her work has remained remarkably stable: how can people come to Nepal, enjoy what makes it extraordinary and still leave enough intact for the next person—and, more importantly, for the people who live there?

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/lisa-choegyal-nepal-tourism-conservation/>